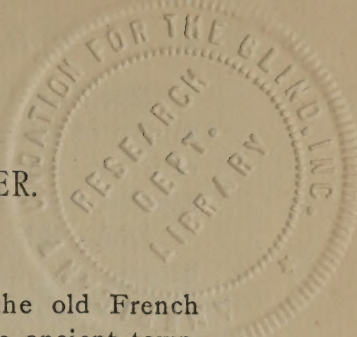


Courson, Countess de.

Helen Keller's French sister.



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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND



HELEN KELLER'S FRENCH SISTER.

BY THE COUNTESS DE COURSON.

FEW among the tourists who visit the old French city of Poitiers are aware that the ancient town, whose churches are among the most curious in France, can boast of another sight, a flesh and blood, living and tangible, proof of what can be accomplished by a woman's intelligence and patience, stimulated by the noblest of all motives—love of God and of his creatures.

Even in France the story that we are about to relate is little known. That it is known at all is due to a professor of the University of Poitiers, M. Louis Arnould, who enjoys a high position in the literary world. He was the first to give his countrymen the curious and touching history of an "imprisoned soul."*

Three kilometres from Poitiers stands the Convent of Larnay, directed by the *Sœurs de la Sagesse*. The gray dresses, black cloaks, and white head-dresses of these nuns are well known throughout the west of France.

Their order was founded in the seventeenth century by the venerable Grignon de Montfort, and till the recent iniquitous laws sent religious women adrift, they directed a large number of poor schools, "*crèches*," and hospitals, both in Paris and in the provinces. Since the government's cruel expulsion of the religious orders, a number of their houses have been closed, but the Convent of Larnay has, so far, escaped destruction; perhaps because the politicians of the day, while they do not scruple to wage war against the sisters, are less inclined to provide for the helpless objects to whom these devoted women silently consecrate their lives. For the present, therefore, the Convent of Larnay is untouched, and both the infirm girl, whose story we are about to relate, and the humble religious, to whom the "imprisoned soul" owes all that makes life worth having, are still, as we write these lines, safe within the precincts of their convent home.

* *Une Âme en Prison*. Par Louis Arnould. Paris: Oudin, Éditeur.

Much has been said and written across the Atlantic on the subject of Laura Bridgman, and especially of Helen Keller, both of whom, being blind, deaf, and dumb, were nevertheless made capable, the latter especially, of receiving a good education.

Laura Bridgman, who was born in New Hampshire in 1829, became deaf and blind after scarlet fever, at the age of two, and gradually she lost the sense of taste and smell. The man who opened the gates of knowledge to her "imprisoned soul" was Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, of Boston, and the story of his extraordinary achievement has been told over and over again in French, in English, and in German.*

Dr. Howe was a pioneer. He was the first to attempt the stupendous task that has since been successfully accomplished by others, among whom gentle Soeur Marguerite, of the Convent of Larnay, would certainly, were her story more widely known, hold a foremost place. Dr. Howe, although the process was slow and painful, succeeded in instilling in his pupil's mind the sense of right and wrong, and a certain knowledge of God, a knowledge sufficient to make Laura write in her diary: "I thought about heaven and God—that he would invite me some time when he is ready for us to go to heaven." Laura Bridgman's devoted teacher, who had "delivered to her the keys of life" died in 1876, and very pathetic was his "spiritual child's" silent grief. She followed him thirteen years later, in 1889.

More celebrated than Laura Bridgman is her countrywoman, Helen Keller, whose *Life*, written by herself, is familiar to American readers. She was born in Alabama, in 1880, and lost the use of sight, hearing, and speech at the age of eighteen months. Her first instructress, Miss Sullivan, taught her to communicate with the outer world. Helen Keller, an unusually intelligent girl, was an apt pupil; she pursued her education at different schools and colleges, under various professors, and became a happy, bright, and cultured woman, who is, moreover, skilled in out-of-door sports, which she thoroughly enjoys.†

What Dr. Howe did for Laura Bridgman, and Miss Sullivan

* *The Education of Laura Bridgman.* By Dr. Samuel Howe. *The Life and Education of Laura Bridgman.* By Mary Lamson. Dr. Howe's account of his pupil has been translated into French and German.

† *Always Happy.* By Miss Chappell. Helen's own biography was translated into French and published by Juven, Paris, in 1904.

for Helen Keller, was accomplished with equal success by a *Soeur de la Sagesse* for Marie Heurtin, a blind deaf-mute, whose infirmity was even more grievous than that of her American sisters, for, whereas they enjoyed, during the first few months of their lives, the blessings of sight, speech, and hearing, the French girl was born blind, deaf, and dumb.

She was the daughter of a poor workman of Vertou, in Loire Inferieure, who, before finding a safe home for his unfortunate child, had endeavored in vain to procure her admittance into different asylums and hospitals. Homes founded for the blind declined to receive her because she was a deaf-mute; and homes for deaf-mutes rejected her because she was blind. In her parents' poor cottage she was cared for according to their lights, but, except that they fed and clothed and abstained from ill-treating her, they were absolutely incompetent to deal with so delicate and difficult a case. It was afterwards discovered that the child was gifted with an ardent, loving, and passionate nature, and, until communication had been established between her and the outer world, her very vitality was an enigma to the well-intentioned but ignorant folk who surrounded her.

They were terrified at her fits of passion and her incoherent screams, and thought for a time of sending her to a mad-house at Nantes. The efforts of an ardent spirit to break through its prison walls were, in their eyes, clear signs of madness. Happily for Marie Heurtin, her father heard that the nuns of Larnay, near Poitiers, had succeeded in educating a young girl who, at the age of three and a half, became deaf, dumb, and blind; and thither, in March, 1895, he brought his unfortunate little daughter. Marie Heurtin's "début" at Larnay are, even now, after twelve years, alluded to with a kind of terror. During two months, she never ceased to scream and to shriek; she used to roll on the floor and strike the ground with her clenched fist. Sometimes the nuns ventured to take her out walking, but their attempts to give her a little change and amusement were generally unsuccessful. In the streets, or on the country roads, she would, for no apparent reason, break into an uncontrollable fit of anger, lie down on the ground, refuse to move, uttering all the time unearthly shrieks, until the frightened sisters carried her home. These outbreaks were a source of endless annoyance to the nuns. Seeing them struggle with their terrible charge, strangers concluded that they

were ill-treating her, and readily interfered in favor of the supposed victim.

The young Alsatian, Marthe Obrecht, to whom we have alluded, who lost sight, speech, and hearing at the age of three, had been educated by a nun, Soeur Ste. Médulle, who died the year before Marie Heurtin's arrival at Larnay. She had explained her method of proceeding to another sister, Soeur Ste. Marguerite, to whom the far more difficult task of educating Marie Heurtin was intrusted. Besides being of a more violent disposition than her Alsatian fellow-sufferer, the latter *was born* blind, deaf, and dumb; she had not been like Marthe Obrecht, in possession of her senses for the three first years of her life; and when Soeur Marguerite took her in hand, she was, to all intents and purposes, a wild animal, whom a confused sense of its helplessness drove to frenzy.

Soeur Marguerite's first thought was to bridge over the abyss that separated the poor child's "imprisoned soul" from the rest of the world and, to attain this object, it was necessary to establish some means of communication, however imperfect, between her pupil and herself. A little pocket knife, that Marie Heurtin jealously cherished, served the purpose. Soeur Marguerite one day took it from her pupil, who immediately flew into a violent rage. When her anger had subsided, the sister took her hands and placed them in such a manner that they made the sign used by the deaf mutes to mean a knife. Having done this, she returned the knife to Marie, whose delight was great. After letting the girl enjoy her treasure, the sister again took it away; a second burst of anger followed, but suddenly the child made the sign that her instructress had taught her, and immediately the knife was put back into her hands.

This seemingly trivial incident was the starting point of Marie Heurtin's education. Having impressed upon her charge the important fact that certain signs meant certain objects, Soeur Marguerite improved the occasion. By degrees, she taught her to ask for bread, eggs, meat, and other articles of food. The child being unusually receptive, her mistress was able, in a comparatively short time, to extend her knowledge; she followed the system that is used for deaf-mutes, only, whereas these are made to *see* the signs, Marie was made to *feel* them, a more difficult and complicated process. When this

was accomplished, Soeur Marguerite taught her to read the raised letters of the Braille alphabet, invented for the use of the blind, making her understand how each one of these words corresponded to the signs that she had previously taught her. Thus she met Marie's twofold infirmity, employing for her benefit the signs and letters invented for the deaf-mutes and also for the blind. The case was one of extraordinary difficulty, and it needed all the sister's patience, stimulated by her love for the girl, to achieve so arduous a task.

In the space of a year, Marie Heurtin learnt to ask for the common necessities of life, but Soeur Marguerite's ambition soared higher, and she longed to teach her pupil the meaning of things spiritual and intangible.

She began by teaching her the difference between a tall and a short person, by making her feel two of her companions who were of unequal height. It was more difficult to make her realize the idea of riches and of poverty, but the sister succeeded in doing so by letting Marie *feel* a beggar, who was dressed in rags, and afterwards a lady, robed in silk, covered with jewels, with a sum of money in her pocket. Marie grasped the idea thus conveyed to her so thoroughly that she expressed her horror of poverty with a violence that startled her instructress. The next day the sister returned to the subject, beginning by asking her pupil whether she loved her, a question which Marie answered by the warmest expressions of grateful affection. Then Soeur Marguerite made her accept the fact that she too was a poor person, who possessed neither jewels nor money, and that she expected Marie to love her all the same, and to love other poor people for her sake. The idea of old age was transmitted to her by making her feel the wizened and wrinkled face of an old woman, and then her own young, fresh countenance and straight figure. Here again, Marie got much excited and vehemently explained that she would never grow old, bent, and wrinkled; but Soeur Marguerite's gentle influence quieted her so effectually that when the other nuns, who had witnessed the girl's outbreak, tested her by inquiring if she was resigned to getting old, she replied: "Yes; Marguerite wishes it." The ideas of time, of the future, of life and death, were successively understood by Marie Heurtin. The notion of death appalled her, and, after being made to feel the cold form of a dead nun, she angrily declared that she would

never consent to die. Her instructress had to explain that none could avoid this law, and that if she, Soeur Marguerite, were resigned to it, Marie must be so likewise. The sister's greatest wish was now to reach her pupil's soul; and this, after months of patient teaching, she was able to do. She noticed that when Marie received a letter from home, she used to kiss it and she made use of this incident to teach her how to distinguish between the body and the soul.

"You love your father?" she argued, taking care that her pupil effectually grasped every point of her reasoning. "With what do you love him? With your feet or your hands? No; with something that is within you and that is able to love. This thing is *in* your body, but is *not* your body; it is called the soul, and death separates the soul from the body. When, the other day, you touched the cold, silent form of a dead sister, her soul had fled; and that soul lives and continues to love you."

When once she had ascertained that Marie understood the important fact of a spiritual world, Soeur Marguerite felt that she might venture to speak to her of the existence of God. She began by explaining to the girl how a certain class of men made certain articles. Thus she took her to the carpenter and to the baker and made her touch the furniture that was made by one and the bread baked by the other. Having noticed that her pupil delighted in the sunshine, and used to stretch out her arms to grasp the warmth-giving orb, Soeur Marguerite inquired: "Who made the sun?" "The baker," was the prompt reply. Marie connected the heat of the sun with that of the furnace. "No, indeed; he who made the sun is greater, stronger, wiser than any one"; and then she went on to explain that in a class a sister was at the head of her pupils; above the sister was the superioress; above the superioress the chaplain; then came the Bishop of Poitiers; then the Pope; lastly, above every one, was *le bon Dieu*, who knew, loved, governed all the world.

Marie listened with close attention, and her mistress completed her teaching by telling her the story of the creation and of the passion of our Lord. The child took an eager interest in these tales, but it was difficult at first to make her grasp the notion of time, and she anxiously inquired if her father was among the wicked men who put our Lord to death?

Soeur Marguerite then proceeded to instill into her pupil's singularly receptive mind a clear notion of the difference between good and evil. When Marie committed any trifling fault, her instructress treated her with a studied coldness that the child was prompt to resent. Thus, by tangible means, she led her first to recognize the difference between right and wrong, and then, by degrees, to understand the motives that should make her seek the one and avoid the other.

The first years of Marie Heurtin's education were naturally the most laborious. Those who have studied her case are unanimous in acknowledging her to be gifted above the average; she is prompt to understand, eager to learn. Comparisons are invidious; it would hardly be fair to draw a parallel between the convent-bred French girl and her more brilliant American sister, Helen Keller.

The latter is evidently the more learned of the two; she is acquainted with several languages, and both by the extent of her knowledge, the variety of her experiences, and the activity of her out-of-door life, she is Marie Heurtin's superior.

Her social station being different from that of her French sister, more money has rightly been spent on her education and pursuits.

The ambition of the good nuns of Larnay was to open to the "imprisoned soul" of their charge the wide horizons of the spiritual world, from which she was hopelessly excluded by her threefold infirmity. They wished to make her a good, useful, and happy member of society. But they never lost sight of the fact that Marie was a child of the people, and they trained her as befitted her social station, studiously avoiding anything that could develop unhealthy tendencies or lead her to look down upon her poor parents and humble companions.

Monsieur Louis Arnould, whose thoughtful and sympathetic account of the blind deaf-mute of Larnay excited keen interest throughout the learned world, and provoked much interesting correspondence between professors of different nations, pronounces Marie Heurtin's education to be, in all respects, excellently carried out. He was, on several occasions, requested by Soeur Marguerite to examine her pupil on the subjects she had studied, and the result was, he informs us, highly satisfactory.

Marie knows her catechism and religious instruction thoroughly; she also has an accurate and sufficient knowledge of

church history, the history of France, geography, and arithmetic. She writes easily and seldom misspells. Her letters to her friends and benefactors are the simple, truthful outpourings of a grateful and affectionate disposition, and the essays that she is made to write on different subjects prove that the girl to whom the world was a dark place of terror, can enjoy, up to a certain point, the gifts and beauties of nature.

As is the case with the blind, her sense of touch is marvelously developed. M. Arnould and his family having been to see her, she quickly, by passing her fingers over the face of her visitors, pronounced two of them to be sisters, and accurately stated the age of each one. The same sense of touch enables her to play at dominoes as rapidly and as correctly as if she saw.

While developing her pupil's intellect, Soeur Marguerite, mindful of Marie's humble origin, did not neglect the more commonplace and practical sides of daily life. She taught her to sweep, to dust, and to arrange the living-rooms of the convent. These she does with a thoroughness and a method that many a housemaid, gifted with eyesight, might well imitate.

But the field in which Soeur Marguerite achieved her greatest success is neither Marie Heurtin's intellect nor memory, nor even her practical sense of order and usefulness. The sister wished, above all things, to reach her pupil's soul, and this she succeeded in doing at the end of some months. One so sorely tried, placed in conditions so abnormal, needed special training, and her teacher's ambition was to develop the spiritual side of her nature in such a manner that she might find in spiritual things the compensations and consolations best suited to her shadowed life. After impressing upon Marie the existence of a Divine Creator, the sister proceeded to develop other elementary notions. The girl's eager and generous nature fully responded to her teaching, and with a rapidity that speaks volumes for the sister's proficiency as an instructress, and for her pupil's receptive powers, Marie Heurtin grasped the full meaning, grandeur, and beauty of the good nun's religious teaching.

In May, 1899, she was allowed to make her First Communion. She performed this solemn act, not only with a clear and complete knowledge of what she was doing, but also with an overpowering and radiant feeling of joy.

An innate and deep-seated cheerfulness is Marie Heurtin's

chief characteristic. We cannot wonder at it, when we learn that the girl, who a few years ago was an object of terror and repulsion, is now in full possession of the real secret of happiness, a secret that sets those who are fortunate enough to penetrate its hidden meaning above the wear and tear, the changes and vicissitudes of life. She has learnt not only to accept the cross that has been laid on her by an all-wise Providence, but to rejoice in it; and she has attained this rare degree of perfection with the happy unconsciousness of an innocent child.

One day Soeur Marguerite made her understand that a wealthy lady of Poitiers would probably give her the necessary sum of money to go to Lourdes. There, added the sister, we will pray *le bon Dieu* to cure Marie's blindness through the intercession of his Holy Mother.

The girl listened attentively, evidently grasping the full meaning of her kind mistress' speech and the hope it held out to her; then, with an expression of radiant joy, she touched her sightless eyes. "No"; she said, "I wish to remain blind. I would rather not see here below in order to see better in heaven."

Even from a human standpoint, Marie Heurtin's life is not devoid of interest and of pleasure. She can converse, by means of her fingers, with her fellow deaf-mutes and with the nuns of Larnay, and it is curious to see the rapidity and deftness with which she communicates, by touch, her thoughts and impressions. Although, among the inmates of the convent, there are none afflicted to the same degree, yet all her companions are more or less infirm. All things, therefore, are ordered so as to enable these to take part, as far as possible, in the daily life that goes on around them.

As an example, M. Arnould tells us that he was present at a sermon in the convent chapel, and he explains how the preacher's words were ingeniously conveyed through different channels to his 250 hearers, most of whom were either blind, deaf, or dumb; Marie Heurtin and Marthe Obrecht being the only ones in whom the three infirmities were united.

The preacher, standing close to the communion rail, spoke to the blind who sat before him; a nun, standing on a platform, transmitted his discourse by signs to the deaf-mutes; at the same time, another sister, by moving her lips with peculiar distinctness, pronounced it, without a sound, for the benefit of

the deaf who were not mutes, and the neighbors of Marie Heurtin, skilled in the language by touch, transmitted it to her by making on her hands the conventional signs.

The stupendous task, so successfully accomplished by Sœur Marguerite, was little known to the public at large, even in France, until M. Arnould published his remarkable pamphlet. With characteristic humility, the sisters shunned notoriety, and only the pressing entreaties of their friends and the direct encouragement of Pope Leo XIII., could prevail upon them to allow their work to be made known. A *prix Montyon*, which, as our readers probably know, is given to reward deeds of unusual devotedness and benevolence, was awarded to Soeur Marguerite in 1899, and, in 1903, the *Société d'encouragement au bien* bestowed a *civic crown* on Marie Heurtin's gentle teacher.

The nuns at Larnay, although they were prevailed upon to allow their work to be made public, declined to be present at the meetings where its successful issue was solemnly proclaimed; but the *civic crown* was brought to them, and it now hangs in the convent parlor.

Monsieur Arnould, whose remarkable work on the subject first drew attention to Marie Heurtin's threefold infirmity, has since then received letters from professors and philosophers in Germany, Holland, France, and other countries, raising interesting discussions on the subject. Many philosophical problems are suggested by this unique case. For the reason that Marie Heurtin, unlike her American sister, was blind, deaf, and dumb from the hour of her birth, the task achieved by Soeur Marguerite was one of superhuman difficulty.

Among the philosophers who were more particularly interested in the story we have just related, was Father de Groot, a Dominican, Professor of Thomist Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He came to France for the express purpose of visiting the *Institut Pasteur* in Paris and our heroine at Larnay, and his account of the latter was published in a Dutch review. He heard from the lips of Soeur Marguerite the details of Marie's arrival at the convent and of the terrible scenes of anger that frightened the nuns, when the unfortunate little creature was left on their hands. As a striking contrast, he draws a charming picture of the girl as she is at present: sweet and bright, full of vivacity and quickness, yet perfectly

self-possessed and calm. Her spiritual transformation is far more remarkable, and Père de Groot marveled at the purity, nobility, and generosity of her aspirations, at the depth of her earnest, loving nature. He ascertained also that her life, even apart from its intense spirituality, is not devoid of interest, that she can enjoy sunshine and flowers, the books that she reads with her fingers, the friends who come to see her, and with whom she communicates through her devoted instructress. She is always ready to please others, and contrives, in spite of her threefold infirmity, to be a really useful member of the large household where she has found a home. She is keen over her lessons, loves history, has strong likes and dislikes on the subject of the heroes with whom her studies make her acquainted; but although her intelligence is remarkably quick and receptive, more remarkable still is her spiritual growth.

No physical infirmity can impede the strong impulse of her soul towards God, whose tenderness, wisdom, and power she fully realizes. Some years ago, when the iniquitous laws against religious were issued, the nuns of Larnay feared that their time must come, and Marie wept bitterly at the thought of being separated from "Marguerite."

The danger has not passed away, and the Convent of Notre Dame de Larnay is still threatened, but Marie Heurtin, the most helpless of the helpless beings within its walls, no longer fears. "God is a good Father," she says to her anxious companions. "He watches over us; he will not part us; let us live in peace."

May the trustful words prove prophetic and the devoted Sisters of Notre Dame de Larnay be spared the cruel fate of so many religious women throughout France!

LISHEEN; OR, THE TEST OF THE SPIRITS.*

BY CANON P. A. SHEEHAN, D.D.,

Author of "My New Curate"; "Luke Delmege"; "Glenanaar," etc.

CHAPTER VII.

A LEPER.



WHEN Outram tapped at his wife's door, and, uninvited, entered, he found the room in complete darkness. He could not distinguish Mabel's figure, and said hesitatingly:

"Mabel, are you here?"

"Yes"; she said firmly. "I am here. What do you seek?"

"Let me ring for a light. There's something wrong. What is it?"

"You have come into my room unasked," she said. "You have something to say, or seek. Better say it in the darkness than in the light. What is it?"

"Mabel," he said, "there's something evidently wrong. This is unusual. Are you coming down to dinner? Or, look here," he said, as if suddenly struck by a new idea, "will you let me send for Dr. Bellingham? Clearly you are not well."

He had come over, guided by her voice, and by the faint gleam of pallor from her face, and stood over her, as she sat by the window.

"Again I repeat," she said, "you have come here unsolicited. Furthermore, you are acting a part, and acting it badly. You have something to say; say it. If you have naught to say, leave me."

He still kept a firm hold on his rising temper, though he felt his hands trembling.

"For God's sake, Mab," he said, "let nothing come between us now. We are too recently yoked to quarrel. There will be misunderstandings, I suppose, forever, between married people; but, as a rule, they are easily cleared up. Now, it is clear, we both have tempers. We can't help that. But, for

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